

**Dinner at Sassafras Co-op:
Food and the Making of a Conscious Community**

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Thesis
for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
in
Liberal Arts and Sciences

College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
University of Illinois
Urbana-Champaign, Illinois

2008

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ABSTRACT This project talks about my experiences as a student researcher at Sassafras Co-op, which is a vegetarian housing co-operative near the university campus. Fourteen co-op residents share the house and everything in it, including cooking and labor responsibilities. A critical part of co-op ideology is the building of community. At Sassafras, food plays an important role in the creation of community through its designation as a vegetarian space, shared cooking and food purchasing, and a shared daily meal. Food is central to my project because it is the object which initially attracted me to Sassafras. I immediately identified with Sassafras' foodways, and this has evoked memories and previous knowledges that are a source of pleasure but that also mediate my experience and analyses. Looking at food provides a window through which one can identify how the connections between individual members' sense of "being in the world" and Sassafras ideology are lived out in daily life at the co-op. Egalitarianism, re-use of resources, vegetarianism, conservation, anti-capitalism, and a general rebuilding of community all play into what I call Sassafras ideology. Broadly speaking, this project speaks to the ways in which individuals come together to consciously negotiate their understandings of the complex processes of the world.

Introduction: The Leftover-Orgy Calzone Story

We are in the dining room, which is next to the kitchen. A rectangular table and a smaller round table are pushed together to make a larger table, which is surrounded by mismatched chairs. On one wall is a shelving unit that has cabinets and drawers where people can help

themselves to dishes, mugs, cups, utensils, and various condiments. On the opposite wall is a long table where the food is served buffet-style. Above the buffet table is a dry-erase board on which the cooks-for-the-night write the dinner menu.

It is a little past 7:00. June and I have brought out the dinner which we had been preparing since 5:30. Tonight there are more friends in the room than co-op members. Bert, Alex, Victor, Rachel, Leslie and June are the only members present. Besides me the guests include Megan, June's roommate from sophomore year, a prospective co-op resident, an ex-co-op resident, my vegan-convert friend, Leslie's friend who teaches African dance, an older man with long curly hair whose children are college-aged, and a few more people. The group is so large that we have to pull the living room couch up to the table for additional seating. There always seems to be enough food to satisfy everyone. Tonight's menu consists of a vegetable/fruit medley salad with tahini dressing, dilled cucumbers that have been thoughtfully donated by a friend who wants to use them before spring break, gooey carob-coconut bars, fresh sliced apples, and the star of the story, "Leftover-Orgy Calzones".

June is standing and eating at the end of the rectangular table because there are not enough chairs; after she cooks dinner she is always too energetic to sit anyway. June laughs with her signature snort, and smiles at the dining room full of people. "You wanna hear the story of the calzones?" she asks. "...no, I don't think you wanna hear the story of the calzones!" All diners appear to be intrigued, and June looks in my direction and laughs. "Well, now we REALLY want to know the story of the calzones!" shouts someone from the table. "Tell the story of the calzones, June!" I urge. "Ok!" she laughs, and begins. The story goes somewhat like this: Last Thursday or Friday someone cooked a split pea dish that wasn't that good. The completely filled leftover container in the fridge gave testament to the dish's failure to appeal.

The peas were undercooked and the spices were not exactly right. The next day June used the split peas as a pizza topping, which went over a little better than the original dish. She still used only a portion of the leftovers. The day after that, someone else made a different variation of split pea pizza. There were still leftovers. The following day, Mayra took all of the leftovers in the fridge—quinoa, black beans, various other beans, potatoes, etc.--mixed them with the split peas, and served the new dish for dinner as “Leftover Orgy”. This got a laugh, but Leftover Orgy still filled most of a container when I came to cook with June on Friday afternoon. She pulled the greenish-yellow lumpy mixture out of the fridge and asked me if I could “fix” it. She also brought out a huge plastic bag filled with bread dough that she had acquired from the dumpster outside of a local restaurant that bakes its own bread. That was two weeks ago, but the dough had been frozen, and she thawed it especially for tonight. June's culinary vision this Friday was the Leftover Orgy calzone. I went to work on the leftovers, adding diced tomatoes, nutritional yeast, Bragg's liquid aminos, pepper, cayenne, garlic... basically any spice I found in the fridge or cupboard. I rolled out two balls of dough, stuffed each with amped-up Leftover Orgy, and made two massive calzones that each took up most of a baking sheet. When they were done baking, the calzones were golden brown, crusty, and delicious looking. They were stunningly impressive on the buffet table, though their size made them difficult to cut and share without making a mess. “Well, the best part of the calzone is the crust!” says the older man with curly hair who smells of patchouli. All the diners agree that we did a great job considering the ingredients with which we were working. However, it is determined that Friday's calzone is to be Leftover Orgy's last reincarnation.

The Conflicted Student “Researcher”

The “senior thesis” is a semi-conspiratory trick for undergraduates that is intended to give students a glimpse of the processes involved in undertaking a long project. Though the project does indeed make some meaningful analyses, rather than yielding astounding conclusions, it offers more of a window through which one can view the negotiations of an undergraduate student's first large research attempt. My story is wrought with conflicted intersections: of my naïve contempt for social science and apprehension about producing a document that proves that four years have not been wasted and which is acceptable for judgement by academic professionals; of being a student, among students, writing about students; of the notion of research looming over hanging out; of my overzealous focus on food; of nostalgia.

I first visit Sassafras in order to conduct an interview with two women who study environmental sciences, and who are particularly concerned about the human/environment relationship. I am interested in how their areas of academic study and their lifestyles intertwine. What role does their university education play in their everyday life? I begin with the assumption that these students have ideas about the environmental and social implications of modern-day food production and consumption, and that these ideas will be evident in their daily food choices. I had hoped that our discussion would include their insight about hot topics like sustainability, eat local, slow foods, organic foods, vegetarianism, etc. My original plan is to talk to as many students as possible in their program of study about their everyday food choices, paying attention to each individual's personal background, beliefs/values, economic constraints, and the limitations/advantages of being undergraduate students on a large college campus in the midwest.

Research proved to be difficult with the original project because I could not seem to find enough students in the program who were willing to participate. It would have been easy to

draw participants from a required class in the major, but the classes that were best suited for this are held in spring, and that would be too late to gather research. The parameters of the project were confusing and I was making too many assumptions about which issues were likely to concern the students. Most importantly, I was not interested in the project. People questioned my motives: was I trying to prove certain individuals' actions hypocritical? As much as I explained that this was not my intent, people were uncomfortable with the topic, which made me uncomfortable. I loathed the project and the work it would entail and I began to resent Anthropology altogether.

I ditched the original project soon after I discovered Sassafras. What had been lacking before was a level of mutual comfort between me and the people about whom I was interested in learning. Also lacking was the element of pleasure: an interview at a cafe is not always enjoyable, particularly for students who have a million other things to do. I wanted a venue in which to ground the project, but had none. At Sassafras I was immediately intrigued with the space and I felt “at home”; I could forget the notion of academic distance and enjoy myself. The people who live in the house accepted me, first as an anthropology student and then just as Anona. People were interested in knowing what my project was about and questioned why, but even if they were skeptical of what my goal was, they were comfortable with me. Instead of scheduling interviews I talked to people when convenient, like when we were lingering around the table after meals or killing time in the living room. I used a recorder for only one long interview, took detailed notes on another, and the remainder of the time I relied upon my memory to type extensive descriptions of the day's activities and dinner conversations when I went home after hanging out at the co-op. A few times I jotted notes while at the co-op, but this was tricky because usually my hands were involved in something—cooking, eating, helping, etc.

In order to help conceptualize this project I read Rebekah Nathan's *My Freshman Year: What a Professor Learned by Becoming a Student* (Nathan 2005). The ethnography supposedly prompts the undergraduate to look outside of her own experience in order to reflect on what it means to be a student at a university. When I read it, however, I found myself asking what it means that an unstylish but still physically fit forty-something year old professional is pretending to blend in with 19-20 year old freshmen. The out-of-place-ness of this anthropologist makes the ethnography a poor model for my own. Nathan's account is posited with her memory of what it was like to be a freshman in college, and from her knowledge about freshman, which has been more recently informed by her interactions with them as a professor in the lecture hall or classroom setting. My story comes from the vantage point of my experience of Sassafras as a student, a guest, a vegetarian, as someone who is “cool with the co-op”. I feel as though I could have been a co-op member, had I known about Sassafras a year ago when searching for a place to live. I do not claim to know the inner workings of the co-op. All that I can speak for is my own interpretation of what the co-op means as a space that is tied to the university through the lives of college students who live in and visit the house. Memory is also woven through my account, and it surfaces when nostalgia and preconceived knowledges and judgements give meaning to how I perceive particular moments. Thus, memory is an important part of what makes the experience pleasurable or displeasurable.

At Sassafras “blending in” is not an issue. I am one of the dozens of guests that are invited to share dinner every week. Sometimes I help cook dinner, hang out or take naps in their living room, meet at parties, bars, the pool, eat dinner and brunch, and invite my own friends to the house. Most guests are college-aged, but there are also men and women in their 30's, 40's, and 50's who are invited for dinner. Bert, a resident, tells me that the prerequisite for an invite is

that the person must be “cool with the co-op”. Cool seems to mean that the person must have an open mind, and openness is measured by her own comfort level with regard to the way things work at the co-op. The person who pushes a Leftover Orgy calzone away in disgust will likely feel uncomfortable in the situation. Because comfortable is the only way to be at the co-op, this uncomfortable person will be left out of the feeling of community. The co-op is not for her. I have met people from varying ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds at the co-op, different ages, cliques, majors, etc. The hippie crowd will mix with the hipster crowd and the straight-laced computer nerd crowd, the undergraduates with graduates and non-students, the middle-aged neighbors who live down the street will share in dinner, and the habitual meat-eater will enjoy an eggless brunch. At mealtime, what guests have in common is that they are sharing a free meal with a free community; those who have qualms about it are not cool with the co-op.

The co-op boasts inclusiveness, and the rent is certainly cheaper than college dorms and apartments near campus. One of the main attractions of Sassafras is its proximity to the university, and because of this unofficial affiliation, the co-op is, by default, a space of privilege. There is a clear distinction between dumpster-diving for bread dough out of choice and doing so out of necessity. To make the assertion that co-op residents assume the role of a marginalized Other is valid in certain situations. However, I believe that this claim eludes an analysis of the meaningful and intricate ways by which this (privileged) group of individuals consciously negotiates their understanding of the world.

What is a Co-op?

A co-op is an autonomous organization or association of that is owned and controlled equally by individual members. This definition of a co-op is somewhat universal, but co-ops

come together for various reasons. The registered domain “.coop” allows people to search for co-ops around the world, so people who live in a co-op once often look for similar housing options when they move to a new city, for example. Sassafras is part of a non-profit umbrella organization called COUCH, which helps established co-ops in Urbana-Champaign and assists in the creation of new ones (COUCH). Sassafras residents are COUCH members and pay their rent directly to the organization; in this way, the house is cooperatively owned by the residents. Sassafras has a COUCH representative who meets with COUCH and members from each of the other co-operatives in the community every other week (June, November 17, 2007). COUCH identifies “longevity, communal meals, resource sharing, shared labor, and community,” as qualities which make the co-op different from a group of roommates (COUCH). Sassafras does fit the mold of a “normal” co-op in the sense that these values are central to how the house functions and how the residents interact. Sassafras can be found on the internet because it is legally recognized under the .coop domain name. At the same time, Sassafras is a complicated space that cannot be defined by a google search. While the idea of a cooperative might be universal, the unique Sassafras community is not created out of conformity to a set of rules or guidelines; rather, it is the daily social interaction that creates and distinguishes the community. Anyone can become a Sassafras member, but they first must visit the house for dinner and be approved by the existing residents' unanimous vote. New members are accepted if they seem like they fit into the co-op community and get along with members; this process is one area which I should study further. The house has space for 14 people and it is economically advantageous for members if the rooms are all taken.

Co-op People

All names have been changed, as well as the name of the co-operative, in the interest of protecting the privacy of the community. June is the co-op member with whom I talk most. She is one of the women whom I met to interview at Sassafras when I was still attempting to carry out the old project. We became friends, and she continually invited me to the co-op and to any other event: yoga, Hare Krishna dinners, lectures, parties, potlucks, or just to hang out. June is sunny, smiling, and loud, and it is impossible for me not to be happy when I am with her. She is a thoughtful and critical thinker, and she loves to talk and ask questions, so she provided me with a wealth of information. Bert is another co-op member with whom I spoke. He is calm, thoughtful, and was immediately friendly and open to talking any time. Victor, whom I will discuss in more detail later, Alex, Leslie, Rachel, Marc, Mayra and Philip are other co-op members whom I discuss in this project. Everyone at Sassafras has been extremely helpful by welcoming me at the co-op from the beginning. When I see any of them around campus, they usually give me a friendly dinner invite.

The Kitchen/Pantry

On my first visit to the co-op, I ask June if she can give me a tour of the house. She gets excited, and says we will start with the kitchen because “This is where the magic happens!” (June, October 12, 2007). The kitchen, which one gets to by walking through the foyer by the front door, is medium sized. It is neat, but cluttered with cabinets, cooking utensils, and appliances. A rack next to the refrigerator holds a food processor. The refrigerator contains mostly leftovers and condiments, like almond butter, jams, and sauces. On top of the fridge are a jars of Vegemite and vitamins. There is a sink in the center of the counter with a window directly above. Below the window is a sign that says that plates should be rinsed for a certain

amount of time before they are put in the dishwasher, which is used because there are “too many people not to” and it is ultimately more efficient than hand-washing (June, October 12, 2007). A bread-making appliance sits on the counter. June tells me that they actually have two bread-makers: “that’s a new, special feature of [Sassafras]--we bake fresh bread every day!” (June, November 17, 200). On the cabinets are posted papers about health and recipes. One is a list of food with various health qualities about each food. The cookbook *Vegan Planet* lays on the counter. June offers me a yellow cupcake that was made with a recipe from *Vegan with a Vengeance*. The stove is impressive: it has a range with six big gas burners, a long oven, a broiler, and a vertical storage compartment for pastry sheets. Drawers are labelled with “Pots”, “Lids”, “Common Cooking Utensils”, etc.

The kitchen is where the compost, recycling and trash bins are located. June explains their system:

In this bin we throw all of our food waste--who ever’s responsibility it is to clean, it’s their responsibility to empty this into our buckets outside. In here are...all your plastic containers and other types of things. We put our beer bottles and other types of glass containers in this bin. Over here on this side we have our trash can, so trash.. and here [other bin] we put all of our paper fibers--cardboard and everything. Even though it all ends up in the same bin, it’s just easier for us to keep it dry and everything--you are not supposed to get your papers wet when you recycle them, (June, November 17, 2007).

Next, June leads me into the pantry, which is attached to the back of the kitchen. This is where I lose it! What would I give for a pantry like this? Along the wall is a shelf full of opaque

plastic buckets and containers filled with nonperishable goods. There is quinoa, “Seven Grain” breakfast cereal, oats, cornmeal, peanuts, walnuts, granola, rice, black beans, garbanzo beans, pinto beans, sesame seeds, flaxseeds, nutritional yeast, textured vegetable protein, white flour, whole wheat flour, soy flour, pasta, corn starch, egg replacer, etc. On another shelf are bottles of Balsamic vinegar, blackstrap molasses, and big jugs of organic olive and canola oils. About five bottles of “Bragg's Liquid Aminos” are on the floor. A corner cupboard holds huge cans of organic whole tomatoes, and usually coconut milk, but they are out. There are two fridges; one has tubs of “Soy Garden” butter substitute, tofu, huge jars of peanut butter and tahini, soy milk, and organic cow's milk. The other fridge contains produce. The newest items are on the bottom shelf, the “just right” produce in the middle shelf, and the top shelf is reserved for vegetables that should be used ASAP (June, November 17, 2008). The drawers in the fridge separate citrus fruits from non-citrus. The freezer is full of items like canned organic juices, desiccated coconut, and blanched almonds. In addition to food, the pantry contains “eco-friendly” dish soap, laundry detergent, and toilet paper.

I tell June not to be surprised if she comes home one day and I am camped out in the pantry, or if she finds me in the morning, passed out after a drunken escapade with a plate of freshly baked muffin-like concoctions on the counter. June laughs really hard, and nods her head in agreement when I tell her about how I love to mix together all the ingredients I have—nuts, fruits, grains, beans, honey, spices, you-name-it—to bake “muffins”. She says she never uses recipes. She welcomes me to crash in her pantry any time, or, better yet, to drop by the house and bake for them/with them whenever I want.

I am genuinely excited when June shows me the pantry, because I experience a moment of nostalgia that I know is rooted in my childhood. Concerned for their first child's health in the

mid-80's, my white middle class parents fed me a whole-foods vegetarian diet. They tell me about the food grinder they used to make baby food with garden vegetables, grains, and fruits. I was weaned with sticky balls of brown rice, blackstrap molasses and plain yogurt; every so often I crave brown rice and molasses as comfort food. The pantry at Sassafras looks familiar because it contains many of the foods that I saw every time I looked in my own pantry while growing up. Bright boxes of sweetened cereals, pasta from a can, and even cuts of meat look out-of-place to me in a kitchen. During middle and high schools, I went through a time of rebellion where I would beg my mother for Trix cereal and buy EZ Cheeze with my own money. Since starting college, I have retreated to my childhood eating habits for various reasons. Now I stock my own pantry with many of the same foods I find at Sassafras.

How would this situation feel to a person who sees these food items as foreign? The pantry is where I feel the initial idyllic draw toward Sassafras. Because food is a central part of life at the co-op, and June chooses to show me the kitchen and pantry first on my initial tour, the lens through which I view Sassafras becomes informed by my own preconceived ideas about food. My memories of food/family become integrated with my understanding of how the co-op views food and community. Based on my own experiences, I begin to make inferences about where and how the co-op might buy food and about how large of roles health and environmental awareness play into deciding which foods are good to eat. If I did not feel this pleasure of connectedness, my experience in the space and my relationship with co-op members would be quite different. Food unifies people and provides a basic connection between them. I feel most comfortable around people who eat the same things as me. If food is an indicator of culture, identity, and belonging, then maybe the comfort of being in familiar-food surroundings comes from a desire for sameness and fear of difference.

Food ---> Awareness

Dinner at Sassafras is at 7:00 Sunday through Friday, and on Saturday there is brunch at noon. They cook and eat all vegetarian meals, and most meals are vegan. Vegan is a term for a diet that is entirely plant-based, and people who identify as vegans do not consume any animal products. Some vegans are more strict than others; many eliminate all products produced by animals, including honey, gelatin, and leather. Other vegans are less strict and might, for example, avoid dairy, eggs, and flesh, but eat honey on occasion or wear a leather belt. Some Sassafras members identify as vegan and do not eat any animal products, but some members do not even identify as vegetarians. However, at dinner the cooks will make sure to inform everyone which foods are vegan and which are not, like when the cupcake frosting contains milk, or even when the whole wheat bread has a touch of honey in it. June tells me on numerous occasions that Sassafras is a “safe space” for vegans and vegetarians: it is a place where no one tries to pass beef stock off as vegetable stock, and no one asks “but where do you get your protein?”. Having a “safe space” for vegans/vegetarians may not seem critical to the well-being of all humanity, but it is important within people's lives. Just as eating habits can create community, they can also be used to exclude individuals. Sassafras members seem to enjoy food and find pleasure in eating together. Any sense of pleasure in food is taken away when an individual is criticized by others who find her habits abnormal. Vegan and vegetarian diets are sometimes perceived as self-imposed restrictions, and dining as/with a vegetarian is a complete killjoy. However, it is evident that at Sassafras there is great variety in food choices, and more importantly, vegetarianism is important to the co-op's sense of community.

As I previously mentioned, not all members of the co-op identify as vegetarian or vegan.

Some eat meat outside of Sassafras. Bert, for example, never ate a vegetarian diet before joining the co-op. He enjoys the food, but not solely because of the exclusion of meat/animal products. Food, and particularly vegetarianism, ties the co-op together as a community. When I ask Bert about being vegetarian, he immediately talks about how much he enjoys the daily dinner and weekly cooking. Dinner is the one time when people know they can come together and relax or have a good time. This sense of community takes the significance of vegetarianism beyond the level of the individual dietary project. Vegetarianism is not merely about being an herbivore, but about a community that consciously eats from the same carefully cultivated garden.

When I ask June if she considers herself to be a vegan, she says: “I’m leaning more towards the vegan side now, but I’m not exclusively vegan. I feel like I’ve had a bad experience with vegans and judgement and, like...arrogant complex,” (June, October 12, 2007). I ask her if she can describe a situation in which she has felt the wrath of vegans:

...Yeah! So when I lived in the dorm... I used to help run the campus vegetarian society when I was a freshman. You know, and I was eating an ice cream cone. And this guy--this hard core straight edge vegan punk guy--comes up and... he was like “Do you know that comes from cow tits June?” and I was like “No! Leave me alone man! Yeah next time how does it feel shoved up your butt, man!” ...I just don’t think it’s cool to make judgements like that. Like to go up to people--it’s not like I was eating a steak or something--I mean, that wouldn’t have been right either. It’s not my place, you know. I think that a lot of people that I know have been really pushy with their ideas, but coming from a perspective of a person who agrees with them, I think it’s not right and it gives vegetarianism a really bad name...I don’t really talk about being vegetarian anymore. I think if it’s

in conversation, or you know how it can just come up in, like, health or something, then maybe I'll say something--maybe I'll just define myself like “Yeah I'm really glad I'm vegetarian,” (June, October 12, 2007).

June's mention of health cues me into the belief that vegetarianism is healthier than meat-eating. I am curious as to whether members of Sassafras are specifically concerned about the relationship between food choices and physical health. Though I cannot conclude that physical health is critical to the whole of Sassafras ideology, when I ask June if health is a reason that she became vegetarian she says:

Absolutely. God, yeah....I wasn't healthy before. I had no idea--I just put in my body whatever was in front of me. I didn't even think about it. So I started cooking vegetarian, and I realized, oh, I need this type of mineral, oh that's what that does, oh okay!...it's just awareness. And I think that goes back to environmental sciences. Like whatever you can make yourself aware of--whatever it is you choose to be aware of--you will be aware of it. So if I make myself aware of food... (June, October 12, 2007).

June talks about health in terms of choosing foods with the nutrients her body needs for optimal functioning. She also seems to think about the relationship between food and consumption as a critical part of understanding one's “being in the world”. Becoming “aware”, as June describes, is to develop a particular consciousness. When people become aware, they choose to acknowledge the relationships and interactions in a lived reality. June relates her awakening to conscious food consumption to studying the environment, which is her area of academic interest.

June says:

I think just studying environmental science has made me a lot more aware of my relationship to nature. ...when you study ecology, when you study your intrinsic vulnerability to the planet, its physicalities, like, you need to eat, you need water, you need forests, you need so many things just for your existence, (June, October 12, 2007).

I ask June how her awareness of these relationships plays out in her everyday life. She looks around her, smiles, and as if to say “Duh, Anona!” says:

I mean, first of all, you are in a vegetarian cooperative. I don't eat meat. I don't eat fish. I don't eat dairy products usually. ...that is probably my most direct connection--I think eating is a really important act for us, to maintain our physical bodies... I think being vegetarian really shows that I care about the environment. ...it's just a waste of energy, it's just a lot of things, (June, October 12, 2007).

She also emphasizes re-using resources by buying bulk foods to avoid packaging, not buying new clothing, and simply not purchasing unnecessary items. Once after cooking a huge pot of noodles, June tells me that she is so tempted to save the noodle-water for washing the floor, but everyone dissuades her because it will make the floor sticky.

So why is an awareness of one's being in the world even important? June says:

Well, I look at my ways of--like studying environmental science, eating vegetarian--I think a lot of it has to do with, like, why does anybody do anything?

Like, why do we have friends? Why do we eat food? Why do we go to school?

Like, why do we do anything? I think, automatically, that's what they want to be-- the goal is happiness, (June, October 12, 2007).

Happiness is a basic concept, but what is at stake? The things which provide pleasure for some are often the products of unequal structures of power. Industrialization and capitalism bank upon the marginalization of the underprivileged so that goods/services can be provided for the pleasure of the privileged. Where does the food we eat come from? Who cultivates, packages and ships it? How far does it travel before we can eat it? Undocumented migrant workers pick lettuce that is transported from California to the midwest via an oil-fueled truck. The worker is not protected by U.S. labor regulations and is thus subject to long working hours, low wages, no insurance, and health hazards; oil is the object of war and its extraction and fumes degrade the environment. This is an incomplete story, but it gets the point across: the world is at stake--specifically, the marginalized world. Eating does not happen in a vacuum; food consumption has direct connections with environmental and social issues. Michael Pollen explains some of the complexities of the food system far better than I in his book *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (Pollan 2006).

It is around the dinner or brunch table that members of Sassafras often discuss issues that involve an awareness of the complex system in which we live. At brunch one Saturday, the term “biodiversity index” is mentioned and I ask if someone can explain what it means. Biodiversity index is used by ecologists to describe how much diversity of species exists in a given area. June says: “there's no incentives..like, internationally, for biodiversity to be conserved... I mean under the paradigm which encourages the exploitation of land,” (June, November 17, 2008).

Southeast Asia, for example, does not have fertile land for agriculture but has an abundance of biodiversity. At a co-op conference in Ann-Arbor last fall, June and other members were involved in a conversation with co-op members from another house:

...these guys were telling us about how Monsanto will go to these indigenous communities, like in Southeast Asia, and say 'We're gonna donate a tractor to your community--we're so nice, and we're gonna give you a tractor!' and they're like 'Oh, that's so nice--that's so unbelievably cool!'. Then they use that [tractor], and then they need to buy other implements and they start using fertilizers and genetically modified seeds and all this crap. Basically it forces dependence on this monoculture. All the native species...are becoming slowly extinct because of the homogenizing, (June, November 17, 2008).

Alex points out that this phenomena does not just happen in other nations, but is one of the processes of capitalism that operates everywhere.

...it's not like companies don't do that here--they do the exact same thing. Like actually just giving gifts--in my catering company even. You go up and you have fliers and you give them a cookie, and it's a completely useless gift...but it makes, statistically speaking, a huge difference. Giving someone a tractor is..a much bigger thing, and in this case it's a big buy-in. If they're gonna use the tractor then they're gonna need the gasoline too, (Alex, November 17).

This kind of anti-capitalist critique is typical to many Sassafras conversations. When I ask June a question about how she views “sustainability”, which is a hot topic these days, she is critical of

the term. Is sustainability merely capitalism's buy-in, like the tractor? She asks questions like “to sustain what?” and “for what amount of time?”. June sums up how she views the human/environment relationship by integrating her ideas about happiness and awareness:

Everybody wants to be well, no matter what they believe in, where they come from. And I think that is a really important thing to consider when we're talking about sustainability. Ok, what's the goal? What's the outcome? Why do we industrialize? Why do we manipulate food production? Ok, so we are producing more food. Ok, so people are profiting from it. That makes some people more happy--that gives material wealth...the cultural idea that material wealth is the goal, that's the objective--like, that's a culturally wrong idea. The treadmills of consumption and production--that's what fuels this environmental degradation. Sustainability can only occur when an ideology changes, (June, October 12, 2007).

The notion of sustainability is useless when it helps to sustain a system that is destroying the planet and which oppresses many members of society. For example, says June, gathering the leaders from eight powerful nations to discuss solutions for the rest of the planet in the G8 Summit will not solve anything; it will only secure the positions of power for those nations.

Egalitarianism

So how is awareness lived out in co-op members' daily life through the space of Sassafras? Each individual's personal ideas about forms of action or resistance have collectively shaped the co-op ideology. One principle idea is that co-operative living has less of an impact on

the environment than conventional living arrangements:

...this is pretty much the most eco-[friendly]--in terms of living spaces. It's always good to cram more people in a limited space. If everyone has their own kitchen with its own piping, that's wasteful. You don't need to have your own kitchen. And you know, electricity--we buy all eco-friendly, compact fluorescent light bulbs and everything. You know, if its yellow let it mellow, (June, October 12, 2007).

Someone who is “cool with the co-op” does not mind spending a little extra money on more efficient light bulbs, and does not become grossed out when the toilet is not flushed every time a person pees.

The house operates under egalitarianism. Fourteen co-op residents share the house and everything in it, as well as labor responsibilities. Bert explains to me the different positions and responsibilities of each member:

...at the beginning, when everyone first moved in, we had a list of jobs that we all had to take. There's, for example, financial coordinator, membership coordinator, labor coordinator...I'm the financial coordinator, so my job is to pay the bills, and collect the rent, and make sure that the bills are paid on time, make sure we have money in the utilities account. There's also a bookkeeper--she makes sure that the budget is balanced, (Bert, November 17, 2007).

I ask Bert to further explain his duty as financial coordinator.

I'm allowed to pay money for utilities...We have cable [internet], water, electricity

and natural gas are together, and then rent. ...then there are two food buyers, and their responsibility is to buy the food. I can't sign a check for food...it's really nice to have responsibilities, I mean, it's not my job, I'm not getting paid for it, but I'm still learning and gaining experience, (Bert, November 17, 2007).

Rent is from \$240-\$340 a month, depending upon room size, and utilities added together are \$60 monthly. Conservation is an important part of living at the co-op because it cuts costs and goes along with an environmentalism-aware ideology. Encouraging people to conserve is no problem:

It's pretty much everybody's concern to conserve electricity, because we all pay the bills equally...the less electricity we use collectively, the less we pay collectively...in the summer we didn't run the air conditioning very much and we've been talking about what we want to set the heat at, 'cause that's using a lot of natural gas. So, since we all pay for it we all have a say in what temperature we want. So we average that, (Bert, November 17, 2007).

Food is \$115 a month per person. Bert explains about how the food works:

... part of being in the co-op is that we pool our money together and buy food in bulk. It's cheaper that way, as opposed to everyone buying their own food for themselves...order our food from a truck that delivers [it] once a month...and then shoppers go out twice a week and buy local, organic produce, from, like, the farmer's market, or the [local food] Co-op or [natural food store], (Bert, November 17, 2007).

Alex is the food buyer: "...we call him Papa Sassafra--it takes him three hours to order the food," (June, November 17, 2007). Though the co-op purchases the vast majority of their food, they look for the opportunity to pick up freebies. At the co-op, the idea of re-using stretches beyond the limits of what most college students normally do:

Sometimes we actually scrounge in the dumpster. The [local restaurant] throws away these amazing bags just full of bread you know, touching no other types of garbage--no coffee grounds, no napkins--nothing gross. Sometimes we're lucky and we get one of those, and in that case we don't bake bread. And Alex works at [a natural food store], and he brings home free bread sometimes, (June, November 17, 2007).

June is the membership coordinator, and it is her job to spread the word about Sassafra so that new members move in as old members move out. She uses fliers that boast the relatively low living cost, as well as "...some of the things that other apartments don't offer, like community settings and dinners at 7:00 every night," (Bert, November 17, 2007). The website directs questions about membership to June. Her involvement with outreach is probably one reason why she came to be the person with whom I spoke most.

In addition to sharing the costs of living and dividing permanent responsibilities, co-op members are in charge of completing weekly household chores. During a tour of the house, June shows me the sign-up chart that is located in the kitchen. The chart is used to keep track of labor responsibilities.

If you see right here, we have our weekly job sign-up. At our house meeting...we pass the sheet around to sign up for what you wanna do. Someone is in charge of

taking out the trash, I usually sign up for doing the composting, there's cleaning the bathroom, stairs, dining room, living room, pantry, there's a kitchen deep-clean, outside, cleaning the refrigerator, baking, dish tidying, (June, November 17, 2007).

The same chart in the kitchen tracks food preparation chores, but these work a little differently from general house labor:

...Monday you sign up to cook and clean. If you can only cook one day and wanna clean another day--you can see it's not always equal, but most people will sign up to cook and clean on the same night...two people cook every meal and we each cook once a week. There's a new thing--emptying the dishwasher, “ (June, November 17, 2007).

The chart also keeps track of “food buying proposals”, which is a grocery list that the food buyers look at before the biweekly shopping. The house is always well-stocked with staple foods and spices; however, food items are negotiable. Juice used to be drunk at every meal, but then the house voted to use juice only on weekends in order to “have more money for grocery supplies and whatnot,” (June, November 17, 2007).

Of course, there is a system of checks and balances which attempts to ensure that each member is doing his or her part for the proper functioning of the house.

...when we do labor, we break down what we did, and then you write down what type it is, and how long it took you. You have somebody sign you off to show that you--you can be like 'check this out, I cleaned the kitchen' and somebody will be

like 'ok' or somebody could be like 'you know actually, you need to scrub this stove a little more' ...that's how we keep ourselves in balance to make sure everybody's pitching in and doing their part... At the end of the week we have a pie chart of how people contribute, so everyone has a feel for who's not pitching in, who's not doing much, (June, November 17, 2007).

I ask June if there have been any problems with the system. Does it look good on paper but not actually work? She says that it is a new system that was established just this year, and it seems to be working so far because it is in everyone's best interest for the co-op to function well. People are “excited” about the new labor system because they can say “Look! I cleaned this, doesn't it look nice?” (June, November 17, 2007). It is still too early to tell how well the new system works because the school year has not yet hit its most stressful points, and the overall newness of cooperative living has not worn off for some residents. The new labor system was adopted in the fall because last year's system failed during summer when there was no one around to maintain it. It also had some other problems:

Last year, their labor system was involving money--if you didn't do what you were supposed to do you had to pay a fine...and we talked about it, and we don't feel that money is the answer. We feel that money is part of the problem, by using transactions in that way. We feel it's more egalitarian to do it cooperatively instead of being like 'Well I don't have to do this, I can just pay my way out of it' ...No, that's not okay. At a cooperative we all chip in, we all have to share this space. You can't pay your way out of this. So we changed it to make it more equal. That's one of the principles of cooperative living, (June, November 17,

2007).

Under the new system, when someone does not complete a labor task, he or she must see the maintenance coordinator for a “special project” that has to do with the upcoming week's labor. However, June says “this is not really enforced,” (June, e-mail message to author, March 25, 2008).

Cooperative decisions are made at house meetings, which are held every Sunday at 8:00 p.m. One person is in charge of facilitating the meeting.

We trade facilitations--if you want to facilitate a meeting you sign up at the end of the meeting. Someone keeps time and someone facilitates it. It's an interesting experience...its good professional development skills, (June, November 17, 2007).

The meeting is structured as such:

...we do check-in, labor report, then...we've got to approve the agenda, then we do coordinator updates, membership, maintenance, president--the president's the one that organizes the agenda for every meeting--coordinator updates, food, finance, COUCH, and others. We talk about Action items--if someone says they're gonna do something, then that goes down as action. We revue last week's action items and make sure everyone did what they were supposed to do... Usually we give a time allotted to each [issue] so we try to make the meeting only last an hour, but sometimes it will go over, like a couple hours, if there's a lot to talk about. Then at the end we do check-outs--say how we thought the meeting went, (June, November 17, 2007).

There is a dry-erase board in the dining room where house members write down issues that they would like to discuss at the next meeting. “Approving the agenda” is when the meeting facilitator asks if anyone objects to any of the items on the agenda. This week they discussed membership issues, the bike rack, and Luka, the cat, because “people have allergies” (June, November 17, 2007).

I ask June what “action items” are:

For example, we had moths. Someone didn't close the lids [in the pantry] properly, so we had a moth infestation in our peanuts. So, it was someone's job to put up signs that said 'Hey, make sure to close lids properly!' That was only once, (June, November 17, 2007).

Philip, who also lives at the house, gives another example:

Just recently we had to have the house winterized, because we've got lots of gaps in our windows here. So a big action item was that we got a lot of people together to winterize the house. We had putty and cellophane to put around the windows down here, (Philip, November 17, 2007).

Yet another action item involved the purchase of carbon monoxide detectors. Someone needed to check with city laws about where and how many detectors were needed, and someone also needed to install them (Bert, November 17, 2007).

The Dining Room

The dining room does not really become exciting until dinner time. Dinner is a Sassafras performance of sorts, because it is when the co-op is made most visible to the outsider; it is a chance for those who do not live in the house to see what the co-op is all about. Residents usually plan to be there, unless a class or work conflicts, and usually there are guests. Guests are encouraged to visit the house; June says: "...we're pretty cool about it, like anyone can just come on over and see how we live--you can live like us too! We're trying to expand," (June, November 17, 2007). Dinner is an important way in which Sassafras advertises in order to recruit members and maintain the longevity of the co-op. Dinner became an important part of my study because food is the object that initially intrigued me about Sassafras. However, the focus on food and dinner has limited my research in ways, because I have ignored other aspects of the co-op. Victor told me that if I want to know what really goes on, I should look at the e-mail correspondences between members. The listserve is where people boldly make their concerns known, and looking at it would provide a more raw/organic view of house functioning. I did not choose to do this, but were the project to be extended a look at the e-mails would surely enrich my analysis. It also should be noted that not all dinners at Sassafras are wild and animated; some nights are more popular than others because of co-op residents busy schedules and the flow of the work/school week. Monday nights are far less exciting than Friday nights.

Each time I attend a Sassafras dinner or brunch the experience is a little different because I become more accustomed to what is expected of me and what to expect. Now I am a regular guest and dinners are "normal" compared to the first time I came over in October. Either someone invites me to dinner or brunch, June and I make plans to cook, or I see a co-op member on campus and ask if it is okay for me to stop by that day. In order to best describe dinners at Sassafras, I will chronicle a few of my experiences, beginning with the first dinner in October.

First Dinner

It is my first dinner experience at the co-op, and I arrive promptly at 7:00 p.m. I tap lightly on the screen door of the house and walk in. June is in the kitchen putting focaccia in the oven. June's friend, Megan, who does not live at the co-op, is helping in the kitchen. I offer to help, but they say that everything is ready. There are now chairs set up around the oblong table. People who were waiting in the living room start to mill into the dining room and June begins setting the food on hot mats on the buffet table. She excitedly tells me that everything is vegan. She, Bert, Leslie and two other house residents are here, as well as three guests besides Megan and me. We all go around the table and introduce ourselves. June tells me later that "It's very rare that we actually get everyone enjoying a meal together, but we do what we can," (June, November 17, 2007). We all take plates, bowls and utensils from the cabinet and begin to serve ourselves. Guests seem to follow suit with the co-op members, and in fact, it is difficult to tell who actually is or is not a member.

Dinner is a huge pot of polenta, made with chiles and spiked with nutritional yeast, a chunky tomato sauce with green olives and mushrooms, and potato leek soup that tastes subtly of celeriac. For dessert, there are chocolate/carob chip cookies, lemon cupcakes, and non-vegan white frosting in a bowl so that people can choose to frost or not frost their cupcakes. Some people do not know what polenta is, so we collectively explain that it is basically a cornmeal mush. Grape juice, water, and wine are to drink. The wine is a "private" purchase but has been set on the table to share, and this dinner occurs before June tells me about the decision not to use juice on weeknight meals, so I assume the vote has not yet been made. We all sit down and begin eating. Marc brings out quinoa and tells us that it is for the soup. Some people say that

they have not eaten much quinoa before; Marc explains that it is a staple where he grew up in South America. June tells us that she forgot about the focaccia so it will be part of dessert. She also messed up the original frosting by adding flour instead of powdered sugar, so she converted it to biscuits, and these will be ready with the focaccia.

Because there are almost as many guests present as house members, most of the conversation centers around getting to know one another. Leslie is a co-op resident who is originally from the midwest, but moved to California for a while, and is now back doing graduate work at the University. She says that she has a love-hate relationship with California; she loves how “progressive” it is in some areas, and she loves the natural beauty and social atmosphere, but also is annoyed at how Californians “don't even know the midwest exists”. Throughout the general conversation there is a lot of scoffing at institutions and corporations, and people make short, sarcastic comments like “Oh, well, that's neo-liberal politics for you!”. Leslie and some others discuss going to a friend's art show that ends at 9:00, and they debate whether the distance is “bike-able”. They think it will take 25 minutes to bike to the event which is to take place downtown. Some say that it is definitely bike-able, and some think that time might be a constraint. Mayra comments that “everything is bike-able right now...everything in North America!”. They end up taking a car because they want to be able to spend more time at the art show.

A lot of people get second or third helpings of certain foods. After everyone is finished eating, June, Megan, and I bring the dirty dishes into the kitchen and begin putting the leftovers in big plastic tubs. The focaccia and biscuits are done. June forgot to put salt in the focaccia dough, but it still tastes good, and someone brings out Vegemite to make it more salty. We load the dishwasher and hand-wash the dishes that do not fit. June makes tea for us. All of the

leftovers are labeled with the date and the name of the food. While we are finishing in the kitchen, a friend of June stops by and she makes him a plate of leftovers. I feel like the night has been successful for me, especially when June asks me why I am not living at Sassafras because I am “perfect for the co-op,” (June, October 12, 2007).

February 12th Dinner

I arrive at Sassafras around 7:30. Through the front door I see everyone sitting around the table and I go inside. They have told me to just walk in because no one is used to hearing a knock on the door. June greets me with her usual huge smile and loud, friendly welcome, and asks me if I want to eat dinner. I say “of course!”. No one minds when I arrive after people have started eating; it is usual that guests and members drift in after dinner has begun or just show up for leftovers. Marc made dinner tonight, except for the tomato/tofu soup which was left over from yesterday's Hare Krishna dinner that is held on Mondays at a campus religious foundation. June volunteers at the Krishna dinner and participates in Krishna chanting. In addition to soup, there is brown rice, quinoa, and a coconut curry made with cabbage, carrots, broccoli and tofu. There is a salad made with mixed greens, various other veggies, walnuts, raisins, oranges, apples, mushrooms, tofu, quinoa, fennel, and a tahini dressing. There are so many ingredients that no one really knows what is in it, so everyone calls it the “surprises” salad. Banana cake is for dessert. June had baked whole wheat bread in the bread maker, and there are also pitchers of water on the table. The meal is delicious and is mostly devoured by the end of dinner.

Tonight the men and women have unintentionally sat on opposite ends of the table and are having separate conversations. We talk about one guest's upcoming study abroad in Ireland, and why she chose that destination. This prompted a discussion about why people travel in

general. One woman thinks that traveling is a form of escapism, but that this is not necessarily good. I suggest that travel comes from an obsession with the Other, and June adds “the exotic”; we seem to be on the same wavelength. Traveling involves a reflexive process. June makes the claim that maybe MTV in India has done more to colonize the minds of Indians than British colonialism. Often we think that we are seeing something authentic, native or untouched when we travel abroad, but really we are seeing images of Western-ness and modernity--we see the ruin caused by capitalism and the United States. June says that she wanted to go on a yoga retreat in India, but she came to the realization that one does not need to go far away to search for an “authentic” spiritual experience, and that going to India will not provide escape from capitalism. There are places in the U.S, that are just as “spiritually important”. This conversation is a portrait of how some of the conceptual theories about Self/Other and difference that are thought about by students who do not necessarily think about them in the same framework.

Megan, a guest who was also at Sassafras the day of my first dinner, talks about the breast painting party that she organized last night for the women in the dorm where she is an R.A. They literally made murals by putting paint on their breasts and using them as brushes or stamps against a wall. Breast painting is an attempt to desexualize breasts by showing them not as hypersexualized objects of the male gaze, but as everyday tools for a woman's creativity. June and I think this sounds like a messy, fun time, and we are ready to take off our shirts right away and start. We decide to wait and have a proper breast painting party so we can invite more women. June says that she has been trying to think of a good mural idea for the basement hall, and that this is perfect. Megan is adamant upon the event being women-only because of the emphasis on reclaiming our breasts. She says that if we want to invite men, we should have an

entire body painting party.

After dinner, June and the other girls leave to study and Marc walks the dog that Sassafra is caring for during the absence of a yoga teacher whom they all know. Mayra comes home from her job at the natural food store and sits at the table with a plate of leftovers. Alex is still at the table, and he and Mayra begin talking about work. Alex has worked at the natural food store for a little while and Mayra just was hired. The store's greatest source of profit are their mineral/herbal supplements, because the mark-up price is greater than 90%. Mayra and Alex seem to think that most supplements are completely useless, but because of marketing strategies people still buy them. We discuss whether or not vitamin supplements actually absorb in the body and if they benefit those who take them. Our opinions differ, but none of us actually know anything concrete, except that vitamins from food sources are probably the most healthful. We all are of the mindset that most people do not eat enough vegetables.

A woman comes downstairs and walks into the pantry. We hear an “ew” and she comes out saying that there is oil all over the floor. Alex goes to investigate. Soon there are three or four people in the pantry. I walk in also to see what the commotion is about, but then return to the table. Dr. Bronner's pure castile almond soap has spilled all over the floor. It smells delicious! No one is angry or upset about the spill, and they seem to have fun cleaning up. Alex pours flour over the soap. It is kind of a big ordeal and more people mill into the pantry area and talk until the soap soaks into the flour. Alex sweeps up the flour and uses a mop to clean the floor.

During the spill, I watch from the table and have a conversation with Bert, who is wearing a winter hat, blanket, PJs and is still cold. He says he is sick, and he thinks the house is too cold, but probably just because he is sick. Bert tells me that some residents think the house is

too warm and others are too cold, and they want to discuss the thermostat setting again. Bert is a first year graduate student who plans on finishing his graduate requirements this year because he says it is relatively easy. Next year, he will study environmental politics, which he became interested in during an undergraduate exchange program in Vienna. In Vienna, Bert lived in a high-rise apartment with one flat-mate where they each had separate rooms and shared a tiny bathroom. In order to socialize, he had to leave his apartment and walk around the city or take the subway. He says that living in a large city with one roommate is not his style; he felt isolated. Sassafras appeals to him because he likes being around people. When he wants to be with friends, all he has to do is walk out of his room. Next year he will live in Germany and has already contacted the coordinator of a co-op that he found on a co-op search engine. This particular co-op makes cabinets and furniture. Bert thinks that co-operatives are an ideal living situation when one is young.

First-time Cooking, February 15th

I arrive at the co-op around 4:30, before June has come home. There are not many people around, and nothing is really happening. I sit on the couch, and lean over so my head is on a pillow. Philip is sleeping on the couch across from me; he says he has food poisoning (he does not know where he got it). Bert comes out of his room, puts a blanket over Philip, covers me with a blanket, and sits down next to me, leaning over so his head rests on my side. He takes my hands with his and massages them. At first, this kind of closeness startles me a little, but then I realize that it is not unusual for Bert and other members of the co-op. Touching and closeness just shows that they care, and they think that it is unfortunate that many people shy away from physical closeness. We lay like this for a few minutes, and then I hear June talking outside. She

comes into the house and walks into the kitchen in order to begin cooking, so I excuse myself from the couch and join her because we have made plans to cook together.

June puts on her usual Krishna chanting music and flips through the cookbook *Vegan Planet*, which I own also. June uses recipes as rough guidelines rather than following them exactly. She wants to make pizza dough. There are two recipes: one is the standard, and the other contains ground sesame seeds and is a little more time consuming (Robertson 2003). I say that I have been wanting to try the more elaborate recipe, so June agrees as long as I grind the seeds. I make tea, eat a pumpkin muffin that I find on the counter, and begin to grind sesame with a mortar and pestle. June's only plan for tonight's meal is that she would like to incorporate as many leftovers as possible. "Re-use" is one of June's mottos. It is Friday, and she pushes to use leftovers by the end of the week. She digs rice, potatoes, split pea soup, pasta, and pesto out of the refrigerator. There are not that many veggies in the fridge except for salad greens, but we will probably open a can of tomatoes. Inspired by a similar recipe in *Vegan Planet*, we decide to try pizza with a curried topping. We also decide on a tomato pesto pizza. The leftover rice will be used to make coconut rice pudding for dessert. June finds a recipe for saffron potato cakes in another cookbook, and we decide to make these because June wants to experiment with the new saffron she bought. I cannot believe how starchy the meal is going to be, and I am slightly worried how the flavors of the meal will meld. Then I remind myself that our goal is to cook a good meal for more than 14 people that will use the leftovers; we should be creative and have fun! The meal does not need a theme and no one is expecting us to please their refined palate.

Leslie is also cooking with us tonight. June apologizes about being a terrible cooking partner, because she usually runs late. Dinner should start at 7:00 and we begin cooking around 5:00 or 5:30. It is Friday and people are not in a rush to start dinner. June and I take turns

kneading the pizza dough. There is a lot of it since we tripled the recipe in order to account for so many people. Leslie is having a stressful day and is not talkative. Usually she is friendly and fun, but today she seems depressed. Leslie decides to run to the natural food store to pick up some fresh vegetables for the salad she will make and some ginger. Soon the dough is rising and I am mashing the potatoes with the saffron. June is pouring all of the old rice in a pot and adding cans of coconut milk for the rice pudding.

June's friend Pat, who does not live in the house, stops over. In celebration for the weekend, we decide to take a break from cooking to smoke marijuana. June and I talk about how cooking while high will add a special touch to our leftover extravaganza. Pat, June, Rachel, and I go downstairs to June's room and smoke a couple of "bowls". I have not questioned whether smoking pot is compatible with my research project; I figure it will only make the experience more vibrant. It is part of being "cool with the co-op", though I do not feel coerced. Not everyone who lives in Sassafras smokes marijuana, but people do not mind when others smoke. We are a little high, and June and I remember our cooking duties and rush up to the kitchen. Leslie is back from the store and is assembling a salad, to which she adds leftover pasta. The theme of the meal is indeed carbohydrates. I put together the potato dish while June rolls out pizza crusts. Then I add more spices to the split pea soup, as well as some leftover tofu crumbles. Instead of making a mixture of spices, we use "curry powder". The "authenticity" of the curry is not an issue since we are putting it on a pizza anyway, I suppose. While we are cooking, I am slowly letting go of the culinary "rules" that I have unconsciously set for myself. It is okay for a menu to not have a specific theme, curry powder is not only used while camping, and maybe it is fine to eat potatoes, rice, pasta, and bread in the same meal.

Under the influence of marijuana, our conversation seems intense and brilliant. June and

I are describing to each other how we perceive the flavors and textures of foods. “Anona, how would you describe a walnut?” or “June, what do you feel when you eat avocado?” Of course, we describe the same foods in completely different ways. June notices the way things feel and taste when they are going down the throat, and the taste after the food has left the tongue. I notice the way foods come in contact with the tongue, and how the heat of the mouth interacts with the texture of the food. We are becoming excited about describing foods (we still talk about the conversation as being really enjoyable) but I am afraid that Leslie is annoyed at us for being high, messy, and late. June promises Leslie that we will clean up all of our mess. Leslie apologizes for being in a “bad mood”, and assures us that we are not bothering her. It is 7:00 and the pizzas are in the oven and the crumbly potato cakes are frying in organic canola oil. Co-op members and friends are gathering in the dining room and living room, talking, laughing, and waiting patiently for the food. June and I are not concerned about the time as long as no one else is.

We put the food on the serving table, and June insists that I write the menu on the dry-erase board. Tonight I call dinner “FREEDAY YUMZORZ”. Yumzor is a phrase that I picked up from my younger sister who used it as part of her high-school vernacular; Freeday means an especially free-feeling Friday. I wrote the made-up words in wacky, angular lettering. We named the dishes saffron potato-kakes, pizza Bombay, cauliflower-noodle salad, and coconut rice pudding. The sign was very much my own style, and I could tell that it was different than the usual from the comments people made about it. Later, June e-mails me and says “haha, people didn't erase what you wrote on the food board all week until today actually. So it was freedayYUMZORZ for like 4 days...it was DEEEELISH food!!” (June, e-mail message to author, February 19, 2008).

We all sit down to eat at around 7:30. I sit between Bert and another guest. After cooking for two hours and smoking marijuana, I am hungry. Leslie's salad is delicious and it lightens the carbohydrate-heavy meal a bit. Everyone seems to like the food, and especially appreciates that we used most of the leftovers in a creative new way. As people finish eating they clear their dishes and leave the table. Many of us hang out and talk after dinner, and nibble on the remaining food, though there is not much left. June gets up to clean the kitchen, and I take that as my cue to go help. Leslie usually would have helped, but tonight she retires to her room. Everyone thanks me for helping to cook tonight. I clear people's plates from the table if they are finished eating, and they say "Oh, you don't have to do that". In the kitchen, food scraps, trash, and recycling are separated, dishes rinsed and loaded into the dishwasher, and leftovers put into tubs. I wash the remaining big pots and dishes by hand in the sink. June cleans the counters and makes ginger tea for us, and we talk about our successful dinner and give each other a huge hug.

Sunday Brunch in March

Today I have made plans to talk with Victor after brunch. I arrive at at five till 12:00 and find June, her friend Pepa, Victor, Marc and his friends David and Francis hanging out in the living room. Pepa and June are jokingly flirting with David—they sit on his lap and rub his chest hair in a mockingly sexual way. This flirtation is the main source of entertainment going on in the house. A big jug of homemade soymilk sits on the coffee table, and June and Pepa offer me some, saying "but don't expect milk!". It is a lumpy mess of ground soybeans, water, sugar and vanilla essence; it tastes pleasant, but more like a soybean smoothie. Some people find it too unappealing looking to try. I am hungry from a morning workout, and am afraid that

brunch is not happening because there is not much noise coming from the kitchen. Finally Leslie steps out of the kitchen and asks if someone would like to help clear off the dining room table. There are beer cans left from last night and some dishes. We all get up and help clean the table. Leslie prepares the menu while Alex brings out a big pan of fried potatoes and a baking sheet with calzone-like turnovers. There are also vegan waffles, fresh cut-up apples and oranges, and orange juice. Maple syrup, jams, and ketchup are on the table. Someone grabs the salt and I get out the Sriracha. People at the table joke about Alex always making waffles and potatoes, but everyone loves to eat them. Leslie decided to make calzones because she wanted to make something new that incorporated vegetables into the meal, something a bit more complicated than her usual veggie scramble. Leslie usually tries to make something that showcases vegetables or fruits, and she likes to be creative.

During brunch, Rachel, who is driving back from a weekend away, calls Alex and asks him to make sure there are potatoes for her when she comes home. He announces the message to everyone at the table. Some people begin talking about what foods count as starches, proteins, etc., and about what nutrients are in the meal we are consuming. It surprises me that some people do not know much about basic macronutrients, especially those who live in a food-focussed co-op. This more scientific way of viewing food does not necessarily seem to be critical to co-op foodways; some residents consider it, and some do not. David is not used to eating vegan foods. He jokes about wanting bacon and asks about the ingredients of the “Soy Garden” butter substitute that is on the table. He is not offending anyone, and none of the vegans criticize his diet or give him the vegan wrath.

Rachel comes home and loads a plate with potatoes, and halfway through the potatoes she notices that there are waffles. She pours maple syrup in a shallow plate and dips her waffle in it;

Alex calls this her “disgusting ritual”. Leslie brings out more calzones and says that there are enough for everyone else to have one. Amy looks at the fruit on the table, and says something like “who cut up all the oranges?”. The co-op members point toward Leslie, who assures Rachel that she did not cut all the oranges, and there are more in the fridge. They explain to those who do not know that Rachel always buys oranges, someone serves them all for brunch, and there are none left for the rest of the week. Rachel gets exasperated because they are her favorite fruit, but says she will not hide them in her room because “it’s so anti-co-op-y”. Last time she went shopping she bought extra oranges so they would last through the week. Today Rachel gets her fill of oranges at brunch, and she is not annoyed in the end. After finishing her waffle, there is still a lot of syrup left on the plate, and she says something to Alex about being right about the syrup. June and Pepa move to be near Rachel so they can mop off the rest of the syrup with the hot waffles that Alex is still bringing from the kitchen. With a big grin, June says that she “hate’s waste!”. We all finish eating, and Victor motions that he wants to get going with the interview, so we leave the table.

Outside Sassafras

So far the attention has been focussed on what goes on inside Sassafras. Members of the co-op have a specific “co-op-y” way of doing things; they have a unique co-op consciousness that guides their daily lives at Sassafras. Frequent guests catch on to the co-op mentality and learn to operate within the space and interact with members comfortably, as if they themselves are co-op members. This all happens quite naturally. For example, I approach the house and raise my hand as if to knock on the door, but before I touch the door, I remember that no one knocks and I walk into the house. My sudden appearance in the living room is much more

expected than a sharp knock on the door, and I learn this quickly. So what happens to the co-op mentality when members go outside of Sassafras? Two experiences that I have had--spending the afternoon with Rachel, Bert, and June and an interview with Victor--help to articulate some of the ways in which the co-op mentality does and does not transcend Sassafras walls.

Afternoon at Campus Recreation Center

When I check my email in mid-morning I have a message from Bert:

today june and i and hopefully a couple of other peeps are going to go to the plant sciences conservatory where tropical plants are kept in a large green house year round for public viewing and enjoyment, and we are going to meditate and reconnect to nature in the middle of winter. after that we're heading to [campus recreation center] for some hot tub and pool slide action. if you want to come, we are meeting at Sassafras at 1pm to have lunch,
(Bert, e-mail message to author, February 15, 2008).

I am unable to go with the group for lunch and meditation, but I decide to meet up with them at the campus recreation center. As I approach the building, Rachel, June, and Bert walk up. We enter the gym, swipe our student IDs and go to the locker rooms. Usually I go to the gym, often alone, to do cardio exercise or lift weights. During the spring semester, the gym is full of the New Year's Resolution people or the hot-body-for-spring-break people. Of course, there are also the fitness-minded people who habitually go to the gym. The recreation center feels like a different place for me today because we are here to relax. There is no rush to find an unoccupied exercise machine and no "I just want to get in and get out" mentality.

Rachel, June and I go into the women's locker room and change into swimsuits. Sometimes I feel a bit self conscious undressing completely among strangers, but this time I tear off all of my clothing. Maybe this is because usually I am surrounded by college-aged women who peel their clothing off discretely or under a towel (only the older women bare all). Unfortunately, body image issues tend to culminate in the gym for obvious reasons. Today I feel completely comfortable because I am among friends who are comfortable with their bodies. Comfort is contagious: if everyone around me feels free, for what reason should I be uptight?

Of course we talk about shaving: this is a common locker-room topic. June and Rachel stopped shaving their armpits after they realized how unnecessary it is. Having hair prevents the chafing that can occur when one shaves the armpits. Rachel confesses that she did make a sudden decision to shave over winter break when she put on a fancy strapless dress for a party. Looking back, she thinks it was a silly of her to care about having cleanly-shaven pits at a party where she knew no one, and why is shaving considered to be more appropriate for fancy dress anyway? Oh well, she says, the hair will grow back. Rachel also does not shave her legs. June shaves her legs if she feels the urge. I shave both legs and armpits; I contemplate whether I actually do enjoy shaving/being shaven, or if I have only learned that it is desirable.

We walk into the pool room with our towels, and Bert meets us. First we go into the hot tub, laughing at a sign that reads “no exercising in the hot tub”. We talk about their meditation session in the tropical garden. Today they decided not to meditate, but instead walked around and enjoyed the greenery that surrounded them. June tells us about studies which suggest that being surrounded by green plants correlates with happiness and non-violence. How might the idea relate to our existence in urban environments? Rachel, June, and Bert think that many of the problems in our society might exist because we are surrounded by “buildings and concrete”.

We discuss urban projects that attempt to address this issue, and I say I would like to be involved in a community garden. June says “Do it! Just go do it!” with a big smile on her face; this is a typical response when someone expresses interest in doing something. June likes to encourage people to take action, pursue interests about which they are passionate, and welcome new experiences.

There are six or seven muscular young men in the pool playing volleyball who Rachel calls “the bros”, which might be a reference to fraternity brothers. More than half of these men appear to be of Asian descent, and the rest appear to be white. They are brawny and muscular, wear the same surf-style swim-trunks, and many have graphic, black inked, masculine looking tattoos. June makes a comment about how they are engaging in homosocial behavior, and I nod enthusiastically. She says something like “Oh, you think we don't know, but we know all about you!” and we laugh as though it is an inside joke. Because of fraternity stereotypes about what it means to be male, we infer that these men are homo-phobic. We are celebrating a kind of insider knowledge of a concept that we have learned at the university; we assume that these men do not recognize homosocial behavior. Rachel, June, Bert, and I seem to share the perception that the men in the pool are “normal” college boys. They probably belong to a fraternity, are in the college of business, and are invested in the notion of masculinity. We do not exactly look down upon them, but we see them as silly casualties of social normativity. We implicitly take a haughty stance of being more knowledgeable about the world; we are more “aware”. It seems that claiming an awareness is a way in which co-op members tend to separate themselves from the social norm. During this conversation, I also claim awareness; however, it is assumed that I see the bros in the same way, or at least do not find the viewpoint objectionable. When we decide that the hot tub is too hot, we move to the pool. The bros all get out and go to the hot tub.

In the pool, we try to stack ourselves on the raft, one on top of another. It does not work well. No one minds a lot of touching, and physical contact is not joked about or even mentioned. We swim around, do handstands, but do not play any formal games. June gets out of the water to go on the slide, which is supposed to open at 3:30. There is a decorative palm tree and a large rock in a tiny crafted garden between the hot tub, pool, and slide. June says she will “go through the jungle” to get to the slide. She stands on the rock and puts her hands to the ground while sticking her rear end up in the air while growling, and pretends to be a wild animal. She looks silly, and the bros look at her strangely from the hot tub. I almost miss the moment because I am looking to see if the bros notice and if the lifeguard tells her to stay off the rock. The slide is closed for the day and we are all disappointed. June leaves for an appointment at 4:00, and Rachel, Bert, and I go back to the hot tub because we are cold. The bros leave the hot tub right after we get in. Soon we get out and go to the locker rooms.

Victor

Victor sits in the small, quiet TV room next that is next to the front hall in Sassafra. Most people are still in the dining room finishing the last of brunch or are moving toward the living room. I ask him if it is okay if I record our conversation, and he says of course “I'd rather have you record than write while we talk,” (Victor, March 1, 2008). I fiddle with the recorder, and realize it is out of batteries, and I did not bring extras. I feel bad because I am unprepared. Victor offers to record the interview on his computer, but I say that I would rather just talk and remember things and write them later. He likes this idea. He tells me that he has this problem with writing—he does not like to write or be near someone who is writing, especially if someone is writing about him. I respect this and am relieved, because I would rather not write while

having a conversation. This is extremely problematic, but it is what it is, and I think it works.

Victor is a co-op food member, which means that he shares in cooking, eating, kitchen clean-up, and the monthly food bill. He is Sassafras' only food member. Victor is also an MC (rap artist) who is involved in the local hip-hop scene and has recently been given an award for his work by the community. I became particularly interested in talking to Victor after a conversation I had with Rachel and Bert, who said that Victor's co-op life and hip-hop life are like “two separate worlds” (Rachel and Bert, March 1, 2008). They thought that he deliberately separates them, and they did not know why. This was not a negative criticism, but a mere curiosity. Indeed the co-op and the hip-hop scene seem quite distinct. There is an obvious racial divide, which is unintentional, but nevertheless present. The co-op welcomes people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, and although there are frequent guests who are black, there are currently no black members (there are Asians and Latinas/os). Compatibility with the co-op mentality is more of a definitive factor for who is and is not a member than race. That said, the co-op attracts those with a mindset which is more hippie than hip-hop. Victor does not fit the common stereotype of a rap artist because he is white. However, as Victor explains, race is not a major concern of his or of his peers.

I tell Victor that I am interested in his experience of the co-op as a food member, and I explain my curiosity about his hip-hop life and his co-op life. I imply that it is perceived that he keeps the two spheres quite separate. He seems to enjoy discussing the topic because he talks freely and elaborates. He says that his hip-hop world is indeed different from his co-op world, and that they rarely mix. Victor began rapping 15 years ago, and has been part of the hip-hop scene in Boston, Ann Arbor, and now in Champaign-Urbana. The C-U hip hop is “real dope”, with a sense of community that makes it great for a new artist. What makes it a good hip-hop

community? Victor thinks that it is partly because C-Un boasts the most prestigious public university in Illinois, and thus has become a gathering place for the most intelligent artists coming from the hip-hop scene in Chicago. He stresses that rappers should be smart—they should know what they are talking about.

Victor raps about philosophy and politics, rather than sex, drugs or money, and his songs are essentially poetry. Because of this, he says that he does not follow the status quo in the hip-hop scene. People within the community respect him because he is good at rapping. In the hip-hop community one proves oneself. When an MC takes the mic and the audience realizes that he can rap, the MC gains respect. Victor does not mention skin color, so I ask him how race plays into his experiences as an MC. I almost feel sheepish for asking such an obvious question that I assume is probably mentioned to him often. He is reassuring, and says enthusiastically “that's a good question”. The bottom line is, he says, that talent always wins out. He remembers when he used to go to open mic night in Boston and he would be one of seven white guys among seventy black guys who took the mic. Sometimes people would say things like “what's that white boy doing?”, but when they heard him they respected his talent. Victor candidly admits that he is a really talented MC; he does not want to bullshit me by complying with the idea that a person should be humble. He tells me that there are things he knows he is good at, and things that he knows he just can't do. When he was younger, his cousin encouraged him to try rapping, so he began practicing and found out that he was good at it. Victor's hip-hop friends are of all racial backgrounds. However, there is a severe gender bias within the male-dominated hip-hop scene, so it is hip-hop is hardly an equalizing ground in that respect. To give me another example of how race “does not matter” he tells me about “shooting the shit” while walking down the street in a line with his rap friends, who are of all races. They nod at the black students whom they

pass, they nod at the white students: they are dominating the street. Being part of a mixed-race group—a group which puts off an image of racial inclusiveness, or transcendence of race, is a powerful position.

During his shows, Victor likes to change up the sets instead of following the norm of playing five core songs and then switching out a few. Sometimes he plays the same songs, but there is always something new. A friend of his, says Victor, likes to hear all of his shows because it is exciting to hear what new things he will say; if Victor can keep him guessing, he will always come back for more. Victor says that rapping is “cathartic” and it should be. It is a creative process that helps him to grow, but only if it continues changing. He is speaking of intellectual and spiritual growth; it is about transforming his consciousness and better understanding his “being in the world”. There seems to be a dynamic interaction between him and the audience. Victor is making a social commentary that people are interested in understanding, and which resonates with them. He mentions that some artists in the hip-hop scene are there to make a break, but he is not necessarily interested in breaking out or getting a record deal. To make music for the purpose of selling would take away its therapeutic effect, and would change the quality of the music negatively. Of course, Victor has three CDs, which he sells for \$5 a piece, but their sales are just extra bucks here and there.

About the separation of his worlds, Victor says that he does not “volunteer anything”. When co-op people ask him about the hip-hop scene, he tells them anything they want to know, but he does not usually bring it up as a topic of conversation aside from inviting people to shows. He enjoys the co-op because it is a space apart from the hip-hop scene where he feels a sense of belonging. Having a separate space is refreshing. Victor eats three meals a day at Sassafras, which is convenient because he lives just a few houses away and works a block or two from

home. When Victor hangs out with his rap friends, he says that there is a lot of mindless male banter about sex and getting with women. They are all talented MCs, but their conversation can become annoying when too much focus on what girls a guy has slept with eludes that person's talent as a rapper. Victor does not object to talking about sex and glamour, but it gets repetitive and obsessive. The co-op is a space where he knows there will always be someone around “chilling” and wanting to talk about something more mentally stimulating, or at least something other than sex.

Victor lived at Sassafras a few years ago, but too long ago for many of the current residents to remember. Only Alex has lived with Victor when he was a full-fledged member. Victor describes himself as “the worst co-opper ever,” because he slacked on cooking and house labor. He says that he realized that full-time co-op life is not for him, but he still enjoys many aspects. Last year, he applied for food membership at a different co-op, but was rejected. Sassafras accepted him gladly, according to Alex, who overheard our conversation and interjected. Presently, there do not seem to be serious problems with Victor being a bad co-op food member. I ask him if he thinks that his views on selling music are influenced by the general anti-capitalist mentality of co-op. He looks as though he has never thought about this as a connection between the co-op and his music. He says that he is not necessarily influenced by the co-op atmosphere, but just believes that “selling out” would change the direction of his music.

Another part of Victor's life that he separates from his hip-hop and co-op worlds is his life as a certified Alexander Technique instructor. Alexander Technique is:

...a method that works to change (movement) habits in our everyday activities. It is a simple and practical method for improving ease and freedom of movement, balance, support and coordination. The technique

teaches the use of the appropriate amount of effort for a particular activity, giving you more energy for all your activities. It is not a series of treatments or exercises, but rather a reeducation of the mind and body. The Alexander Technique is a method which helps a person discover a new balance in the body by releasing unnecessary tension. It can be applied to sitting, lying down, standing, walking, lifting, and other daily activities, (The Complete Guide to the Alexander Technique).

When I ask Victor what the Alexander Technique is exactly, he says that it is difficult to explain and that one just has to experience it through the body. He offers a free trial session to people who are interested or just curious about learning more. He gives me a business card and encourages me to make an appointment. Victor helps in the university dance department, assists at a local center for the technique where he works with some of the most respected Alexander Technique instructors in the U.S., and also gives lessons at his apartment.

Victor became interested in the technique over ten years ago after he tried it as therapy for the back pain he was experiencing. It alleviated his back pain, and he liked the technique so much that he began training to become an instructor. He became certified and has gone through double the amount of training that is required. Victor is confident in his instructing skills and truly enjoys his work because of its therapeutic nature. Also, it is an opportunity to share with others something that helped him feel better physically. He also enjoys working with dancers and having a relatively flexible schedule. Instructing offers a relaxing lifestyle where he can assist people in their own creative processes.

Constantly shifting between spaces keeps Victor fresh. He finds no need to identify

solely with one area of his life. He raps, but he does not just an MC. The Alexander Technique is a huge part of his life too, but it remains separate from his co-op life and hip-hop life. Victor floats between these spaces. One aspect he likes about Sassafras is that people within the co-op world know him as Victor; they do not think of him as the MC, or as the Alexander Technique instructor. Moving between groups of people who have different ideas about the world seems to have a positive effect on Victor's perception of himself while keeping him inspired, because it allows for change within his life and for varying viewpoints. However, Victor says it is “dope” when his worlds come together, like at his last show where co-op people, dancers from his Alexander Technique classes, and his hip hop friends all gathered together to watch him perform.

A Conclusion

Sassafras seems to have forgotten that I am doing a project about them. Today, after about five hours of writing, I go to the co-op for brunch. I am sitting in the living room with Victor, Marc, Rachel, a few guests, and I abruptly come to the realization that I have almost forty pages written that concern their lives. Looking around at their faces is a surreal moment for me, and I begin laughing to myself. “I've been writing about you guys all morning! This is funny!” I say, and they look at me quizzically and amusedly. I feel as though I am generally accepted by the group. During brunch, either Alex or Victor asks me “So what have you concluded about us?” and I tell them “I am trying not to make conclusions,” (March 29, 2008). They seem a bit relieved. I am seated next to Rachel and share in her disgusting ritual of dipping pancakes into a bowl of syrup. “Conclusions” is not the correct word; I have “ideas about Sassafras”.

People enjoy living at Sassafras. If some residents do not enjoy living there, they were not part of my project because I never saw them. In this respect, this analysis is incomplete.

However, many residents and guests alike enjoy being part of Sassafras because of the overwhelming sense of community that is created in the space. As a researcher, a.k.a friend, I enjoy being part of the Sassafras community. Food ties the community together, with mealtimes, and with the egalitarian way with which everything related to food is dealt. Of course food is not the only contributing factor to the co-op community; it is one object that carries with it a set of ideas, but it is the object on which I focussed most. By focussing on food, one can understand a particular ideology that stresses conservation, re-use of resources, vegetarianism, egalitarianism, anti-capitalist discourse, and a general rebuilding of community. Food at Sassafras provides a window through which one can understand how happiness and the banal events of daily life are directly connected to the complex processes of social interaction.

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